USDA Forest Service Walla Walla Ranger District 1415 W Rose Street
Umatilla National Forest Walla Walla, WA, WA
99362
509-522-6290

File Code: 1950

Date: October 18, 2019

SUBJECT: Elbow Insect and Disease Project - Opportunity for Collaborative Scoping on Proposed Action Located on the Walla Walla Ranger District

Dear Interested Party:

The Walla Walla Ranger District of the Umatilla National Forest is in the planning phase for the Elbow Insect and Disease Project. With this project, I propose mechanical thinning of 2,600 acres within a 15,600 acre project area located approximately 9 road miles west of Troy, Oregon. The goal of this undertaking is to reduce insect and disease occurrence and spread in the project area. This project would be conducted under Section 8204 of the Agriculture Act of 2014, Healthy Forest Restoration Act (HFRA), Section 603 (16 U.S.C. 6591b), Forest Service Categorical Exclusion 32.3(3).

Collaborative Field Trip during the Scoping Period:

I invite all interested public and affected agencies to join us on a collaborative field trip to the project area on Tuesday, October 29, 2019. If you plan to join us, please contact the Walla Walla Ranger District Office at 509-522-6290, no later than Friday, October 25, 2019 to confirm meeting time and location.

Open House during the Scoping Period:

An Open House will be offered at the Walla Walla Ranger District Office, 1415 W Rose St., Walla Walla, WA Monday October 28 between 3:00 and 5:00 PM; providing another opportunity to discuss the Proposed Action with me and District specialists in a one on one manner.

Scoping Comments:

All interested parties and affected agencies are invited to participate in this opportunity to provide written scoping comments on management options for this Proposed Action Comments are most helpful to me when they identify issues specific to this project, highlighting cause and effect relationships, or refine the Proposed Action to protect resources while allowing us to be responsive to the purpose and need described below.

The scoping comment period will be open from October 18, 2019 to November 18, 2019.

Please provide comments electronically at the Project webpage at https://cara.ecosystem-management.org/Public//CommentInput?Project=57017 , assuring timeliness, efficiency, and tracking of your comment(s). Submit written comments to District Ranger, Michael Rassbach, 1415 W Rose St., Walla Walla, WA 99362. Comments may also be hand-delivered at the address above between 8:00 and 4:30 M-F, except for holidays. Oral comments may be given via telephone (509-522-6290) or in person at the district office during business hours. You can find updates to this project at: https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=57017

Project Information:

Location: The project area is located in Wallowa County, Oregon within portions of T 5N, R 41E, Sections 1- 4, 7-26, 14-23, 35 and 36; and T 5 N, R 42 E, Sections 6-10, and 17-19 (see attached map). The project is located within the Elbow Creek and Sickfoot Creek-Grande Ronde River sub watersheds (HUC12). It is entirely within the Wallowa County Northern Wildland Urban Interface Zone.

Management Areas: The 1990 Umatilla National Forest Plan Management Areas within the project area include: MA A7 Wild and Scenic River, MA A8 Scenic Area, C1- Dedicated Old Growth Forest Habitat, MA C4- Wildlife Habitat, MA C5- Riparian and Wildlife Habitat, and MA E2- Timber and Big Game. Proposed activities would treat stands within MA C4- Wildlife Habitat and MA E2- Timber and Big Game.

Existing Conditions

Widespread insect-related tree mortality is currently occurring within the Blue Mountains and aerial surveys over the past few years have shown that the project area has had the highest concentration of mortality on the Walla Walla Ranger District. Starting in 2012 and continuing through 2016, the Blue Mountains experienced a protracted drought. During 2017 there was a reprieve from drought in the northern Blue Mountains but 2018 was again severely droughty until March of 2019. As a result, reduced availability of soil moisture has exacerbated the effect of density-related moisture demand weakening hosts.

In the project area all species of trees are dying as well as a mix of age classes. While the usual bark beetles, such as western pine beetle and fir engraver, were present in many of these trees, there were also some trees killed by what are commonly considered “secondary” beetles, including twig beetles, Douglas-fir pole beetle, and wood borers. The droughty, hot conditions and overstocked stands have enabled these less aggressive beetles to act as tree killers. Drought–stressed trees are more attractive to beetles because they produce ethanol, a primary attractant to beetles. In addition, trees in these conditions have a reduced ability to defend themselves from attack due to reduced pitch production. In many cases the mortality is occurring to the desirable, older, fire-resistant ponderosa pine and Douglas-firs.

Purpose & Need

Purpose: The purpose of this undertaking is to reduce insect and disease occurrence and spread in the project area.

Need: There is a need to reduce stand densities to increase the vitality of leave trees, in particular, large overstory early seral tree species.

Proposed Action

Thinning of overly dense stands by commercial timber harvest and non-commercial thinning would be used to reduce stand density on approximately 2,600 acres. Overstory-early seral tree species will be the preferred leave tree, however other large diameter trees will be retained. Thinning will generally be from below, but where no dominant trees exist, spacing of leave trees would meet the stand density objectives. A majority of the treatment areas would be harvested using ground-based equipment while some areas would be skyline yarded. The treatments would be phased over a three year period.

Disposal of slash created by harvest operations would be accomplished by piling and burning of piles within units. Imminent and likely danger trees along haul routes would be removed. All work would be done utilizing existing road systems and the construction of approximately 6.5 miles of temporary roads, which will be

obliterated following use. Treatments in type 4 Riparian Habitat Conservation Areas (R.H.C.A's) would be designed to meet Riparian Management Objectives. No treatments are proposed within type 1, 2 or 3 R.H.C.A's and Roadless Areas. No trees over 21" are prescribed for harvest.

Questions: If you have questions concerning the project or how to submit comments, please contact Joseph Sciarrino, District Assistant Fire Management Officer at 509-522-6283.

Thank you for your interest in the Walla Walla Ranger District on the Umatilla National Forest.

Sincerely,

MICHAEL RASSBACH
District Ranger
Walla Walla Ranger District

Encl.:
Map_Project Area Vicinity; Map_Potential Treatment Areas; Map_2018 Aerial Tree Damage Survey